

THE PROCLAMATION OF FREEDOM.

A

S E R M O N

PREACHED IN DORCHESTER, JANUARY 4, 1863,

BY

NATHANIEL HALL.

REPRINTED FROM THE MONTHLY RELIGIOUS MAGAZINE.

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“THE ACCEPTABLE YEAR OF THE LORD.”—Luke iv, 19.

THE New Year broke upon us in a fulness of natural splendor. The stormy darkness of the day preceding served to increase, by contrast, what was in itself so inspiringly beautiful; while the freshly-fallen snow, mantling all beneath in radiant purity, reflected, through an atmosphere of transparent clearness, the cloudless glories of the blue above. But there was a charm in that morning to millions of hearts, of which this of nature was but the expressive symbol,—a charm which it would have worn, though it had come swathed in darkness and cradled in storm. It was a morning which kindling anticipations had beckoned on its way; which had been prospectively hallowed and glorified for the blessed promise that it bore, as through a hundred days and nights it ripened to fulfilment.

Friends, I offer no apology for making the event referred to the theme of my discourse to-day. Indeed, I could do no otherwise. It has to me a sacred importance, a holy significance. God is in it. His providence has wrought it out. Not by the will of man, but of God, has it come. Christ is in it;—He who was sent “to preach deliverance to the captives,

to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord." They who find cause for rejoicing in that heavenly advent we have just commemorated,—how can they help but find it in this which has clearly flowed therefrom, as stream from fountain? They whose hearts responded to the "Gloria in Excelsis," whose strains have but just died away from our churches,—how can they help but exult in an event which, so far as it goes, is a fulfilment of that prophetic song, that promise-laden chorus?—fulfilment partial, indeed, and greatly itself prophetic and promissory, but yet a fulfilment,—actual, sure; and over which, I doubt not, that angel-host, noting with rejoicing hearts the advances of the kingdom they heralded, sang anew, "Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, good-will towards men?" Shall we be indifferent at what is moving them? Shall we not gratefully hail this providential result,—not as patriots merely, not alone for what of success may be potentially enfolded in it to our nation's cause, but as Christian philanthropists, as friends of human progress and human freedom, as looking and hoping for that time,—which, indeed, we pray for, if for anything, when we say, "Thy kingdom come,"—that time when Christ's birth-song shall be *all* fulfilled,—"good-will towards men" be the breath of every heart and the motion of every hand,—"peace on earth" reign on its eternal foundations,—"Glory to God in the highest" be chanted in the aspirations and melodize the life of universal humanity?

Evidently, we do not see—we of these loyal communities—the moral magnitude and grandeur of this edict of Emancipation,—do not take in its vast proportions and momentous bearings and blessed issues. There is, somehow, a

striking want of correspondence between what has now been affirmed of it, and what seems to be the tone, or the degree, of the general feeling about it. What *seems* to be, I say. For that there *is* a deep feeling in thousands of hearts all around us, I cannot doubt; an exultant thankfulness,—a feeling *too* deep for words, for outward demonstrations,—a feeling which the genius of Music, voiced in the immortal compositions of its divinest masters, has nearest to adequately expressed. Yes, I *know* there were those who wept for joy that that day had come; who thanked God on bended knees that they had lived to see it; who were ready to say, with holy Simeon, “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation.” I spoke with one of these yesterday;—one who had felt, in her own person, the insult and curse of Slavery, until, in the night of an intrepid womanhood, she escaped from it; and who goes to-morrow, in an overflowing sympathy, to renew her self-devoting labors among the “contrabands” at Alexandria;—one whose native refinement and true gentility and quick intelligence exceed that of how many! who, in the drawing-rooms of freedom, spurn such, because of the complexion God has given them, though it be—as hers is—but a few shades darker than their own. She, and such as she, chattels! another’s “property”! classed with horses and swine, in the slaveholder’s inventory! Ah, it needs to have *seen* the victims that Slavery has crushed, to have seen on *whom* and on *what* its accursed heel has trod; it needs to have *felt* its heel, to have *been* its victim, duly to appreciate that majestic word, issuing from the nation’s supreme executive, saying, for three million enslaved men and women,—“This no more, forever.” And for the rest, I would chari-

tably believe, as I have said, that their indifference is less actual than seeming, and that what of indifference they have is referable to a certain blindness of vision rather than hardness of heart,—is referable, whichever it be, to influences flowing from the tolerated presence of slavery in the land. That moral Upas has so poisoned the whole social atmosphere of American life, that the heart's instinctive sympathies with freedom and justice, its finer sensibilities, its nicer discernments in this direction, have suffered, unconsciously, in instances innumerable, a partial paralysis and decline. So long familiar have we been with the base incongruity of a free republic admitting chattel-slavery among its institutions, and protecting it by organic law, that many fail to feel and to see the baseness; and have, of course, no heart to rejoice in an act which is the sure beginning of the end of it forever. And then, again, we are too near the event, perhaps, historically, to be duly impressed by it. It has come upon us too gradually; it has been too much and too long contemplated and discussed as a matter of policy; sentiment and principle have had too little to do with its inception and progress, and been too little appealed to in its behalf, for the general heart to flame, at its coming, with the moral enthusiasm which in truth it claims. The fact, moreover, that its scope is partial,—that its results are conceived of, by many, as problematical, in respect alike to those it frees and the nation freeing them,—helps preclude such enthusiasm.

But truly, friends, we should try to see these things which are transpiring around us as they are; to do justice to them, in thought and in feeling; and especially this of which I speak, inaugurating a new year and a new era. As a religious duty should we try to do it. God forbid we should live

at such a time, and not feel the privilege of it, and the responsibility and the solemnity and the glory; and not put ourselves within the play of the electric currents, and drink in of the inspirations, of the mighty hour. For, doubt it as we may, it is a time which, beyond all others, since the peopling of these American shores, will be historically luminous; which the student of the past — not alone the philosopher, but the devout — will ponder, with glowing interest and deepest thoughtfulness; to which the religious mind will turn to feed its faith in an overruling and retributive Providence in the affairs of men. Do I over-estimate its importance? Why, look, and see what is transpiring, in literal fact, around us! Powers, ideas, principles, most antagonistic to each other in all the universe of God, in directest and grappling conflict. Truth and falsehood, righteousness and injustice, freedom and despotism, taking shape in mightiest armies; half a continent the arena of the struggle; distant nations reaching to behold it; treasure and life beyond human computation the lavish sacrifice; a people least warlike on earth throwing itself, as in a day, into teeming camps; sending a soldier from every household; and, fighting, first, for its own rights and liberties, finding itself fighting for the rights and liberties of others, of the helpless, the enslaved, — those to whose wrongs it had selfishly consented, but whose welfare it comes to see as linked indissolubly with its own; finding itself, while striking with one hand for its own deliverance, loosing with the other the shackles of the slave; issuing, at last, in self-defence, and yet not without a justice-loving satisfaction, the mandate at which millions pass from chattels into citizens, from merchandise into men. Such are some of the aspects of this mighty era in more immediate connection with the event we celebrate.

I recur to that. God, I said, was in it. Most impressively so. I know no fact in history that shows more clearly the working of a Divine hand and purpose,— shows how, though “man proposes, God disposes.” Plainly, man has meant one thing by this war, and God another. And that which God has meant by it, he has caused to be borne along, as on a resistless tide, alike by our successes and defeats. God has meant by it, so far as we may read his meaning in the glowing language of events, to destroy slavery; that the blows of the contending hosts, directed against each other, should fall, as well, and both alike, upon that wicked system in whose interest the contest was inaugurated. *We* sought in it but the maintenance of our nationality. God has sought in and by it the redemption and elevation of his bound and downtrodden children. He has caused our selfishness to open a pathway for his own benevolence. Forever blessed be his name for the mercy in this — all undeserved — to *ourselves*. More and more slavery was weakening, debasing, poisoning us as a people. It was lowering the tone of our politics, of our religion, of our manhood. It was taking the life and soul out of us. We were tending by it, judicially and retributively, into materialism and atheism, into a hardness of heart as impious as inhuman. It was the millstone about the nation’s neck, dragging it to perdition; the cancer within its system, threatening disease, if it had not already imparted it, to every fibre of its life. We did not see it so. God saw it. His prophets saw it, and told their vision. But they were scorned, and bid to silence. And when slavery, in the insanity of iniquity, made war upon freedom, freedom *then* — though it knew that slavery as an institution was the sole cause of the rebellion, and that there could be no

peace with its continuance — sought no destruction of it, no crippling of it; nay, deprecated every measure looking to such result, carefully avoided the blow that might weaken or disturb it, made it the one thing which it would by no means touch, though more and more its fiendish hideousness appeared. The compromises of the Constitution must, at all events, be respected. Had Freedom been victorious in those earlier battles, she would probably have dictated such terms to Slavery as would have left it its constitutional advantages, have given it a new lease of power, new chances for securing in Cabinet and Senate-chamber what it had failed of in the field. It was the reverses of Freedom, the bloody disasters, the mortifying defeats, the fields strewn with her mangled and gasping sons, — these, which — short-sighted mortals! — we mourned over as the direst of calamities, — it was *these* by which God saved us. By those losses was the nation's gain, by those deaths its life. Success, in bringing with it peace by compromise, had been its own living death. Precious cost! But we had made it necessary. Our own guilty compliances and complicities with the demands and sin of slavery, for the sake of peace and prosperity, — a nominal peace, a hollow prosperity, — this had made it necessary. We had sowed to the wind, and the only reaping possible to us was the whirlwind. Yes, there was a mercy in those dark reverses, those long delays, those baffled counsels. For then only, when it was found that Freedom could not stand against her foes with their "institution" intact, and their victim-millions working against her, did she consent to disregard the provisions of the Constitution, and strike at that institution itself. Then only had it come to pass, that, as a war measure and a necessity of war, by the right accorded all

governments of self-defence, by a law of nature overriding all human enactments, this could constitutionally be done.

Pause, now, and consider the workings of the Almighty! A score of months only ago, and the overthrow of slavery seemed, to the wisest and most far-seeing among us, an event which the century, possibly, might see, but whose possibility was located far away in the dim distance; to be achieved by the slowly-working influences of an advancing Christianity, or by its own savage and revengeful hands. The way seemed hedged by insuperable difficulties. There it stood, intrenched within the Constitution, conscious of its mighty power, haughty, defiant; and well knowing that, with all its other securities, it had friends and defenders among ourselves. The strife came on: it continued: it is yet. But now, above its smoke and din and groans and death, comes the voice of the nation's chief magistrate, — standing in his place of power, clothed in the majesty at once of constitutional and of moral law, — proclaiming deliberately, calmly, that from this blessed first of January, 1863, three million of slavery's victims are "henceforth and forever free." Truly, "this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes." Yes, give God the glory. We can take none of it ourselves. It is an event forced upon us. Blindly and undesignedly have we wrought for it. Step by step we have fought against it. Not, I repeat, by the will of man, but of God, has it come. Glory be to *God!*

What has come? "Only a proclamation," say some, — "a state paper, with the signature of the President, declaring the slaves of certain localities free; but that does not make them so: it is still dependent on the fortunes of the war how soon, or whether at all, they obtain their freedom." I

have no sympathy with that disposition which receives questioningly what is in itself a precious gift, because it is not the most precious conceivable or desired ; nor with the distrust implied by such questioning, in the case before us, of the Great Giver's will and power to perfect it. When he has made a way for what *is* through such ranks of obstacles, — a way which human wisdom never by so much as a glimpse foresaw, — I will not doubt that the way will be opened, by the same wonder-working Providence, for what we desire *shall* be. God will not leave his work unfinished, — nor delayed, but by our unfaithfulness. That most of those held in slavery, if not all, have long known that the day of their redemption was drawing nigh, was as good as come, — though doubtless, in many instances, with conceptions very vague and crude about it, — this none doubt who know anything of them. And it serves to explain the most remarkable quietness maintained by them through all this wide-spread and land-rocking tumult of which they are the innocent cause ; that patient willingness to wait in their old position until the door of their egress from it was fairly opened, and they could go out as recognized men, and not as skulking beasts. How greatly have we mistaken and done injustice to the negro character and disposition, in predicting, as from the beginning so many have, violence and bloodshed on the part of the slaves, in the intoxication of anticipated freedom, or the impulse of vindictive passion. There has been nothing of it, — nothing at all. A fact that speaks volumes for them. For while it may be ascribed in part to their assurance of coming freedom, — an assurance which there has been so shamefully much, in the bearing towards them of our government and army, to weaken, — it is yet more to be ascribed

to a gentleness, and amiability, and unvindictiveness of disposition, which, as a race, they eminently possess. They have known, I said, that their freedom was at hand. They know that it is *proclaimed*. And knowing it, they will demand — as they ought — possession of it; and will have it. But were it so, that the fact of freedom should long tarry behind the date of its proclamation, the *proclamation* is the mighty fact. There it stands, irrevocable, sure, — the guaranty of their liberty, valid against the world; the charter of citizenship, which a nation's power stands pledged to guard, — which whoso fails to respect as such does so at his peril. Before it "bills of sale" turn to waste-paper; and chain and handcuff melt, as in the fervent heat of a thousand suns; and forms stand erect, and eyes brighten, and burdens drop, and life and the world put on a new significance, and bud and blossom with new blessings. And, more than this, and whatever else it does, or fails to do, it decrees the nation's emancipation. Not strictly, — for the guaranties of slavery, untouched by this edict, linger on its statute-book, — but, practically, it decrees the nation's emancipation. It has broken from its ignoble and debasing thrall. It has spoken, at last, that magic word, "Freedom," never to unlearn it. It has set its face towards the sun, never to turn backward. It has brought itself into harmony with the spirit of the age, — with its own immortal principles and sacred declarations. It has floated itself into the life-stream of Christian civilization. It has put itself right with God; so that it may ask his blessing on its cause without doubtfulness, — may feel that the eternal forces of his spiritual providence shall surely work for it.

Slavery *can* be no more the potent agency in the nation

it has been,—potent for evil, and only evil. Thank God! the Power whose corrupting influence has permeated every tissue and pore of the body politic; which has suborned to its ends, so greatly, our public men; has controlled presses, has marshalled parties, has silenced pulpits, tampered with the very heralds of salvation and the very Gospel of the Redeemer, and debauched the public conscience to believe a lie; which more than anything else—here in the midst of us, and all over the land—has impeded the progress of God's kingdom,—this Satanic Power, this instituted Barbarism, is forever dethroned, and lingers but to die. And for nothing, as for this, should our hearts so thank God to-day.

Now, I believe, a new day is to open upon our country,—day of prosperity, glory, power, and peace, such as it has never known, nor any nation of the world before it. Now, as before we could not, may we have a united country, now a real prosperity, now an abiding peace;—blessings, enhanced by the thought that our brethren of the South, now our foes, shall share them with us. Not, of course, that the removal of slavery alone is to do all this, but that in its removal the great obstacle is no more. The spirit of Wrong embodies itself in more than one institution. In forms innumerable it is all around us, enough to task to the utmost every energy of philanthropy. But now will there be a better heart to labor against it, better hopes and chances of success. That trial, suffering, disorder, evils of various sorts, will come as incidental to this very good of emancipation, is, of course, to be expected. No great social revolution can come and progress without them. The change from coerced to voluntary labor, when the laborers are numbered by millions, is a vast one, and things

cannot speedily, or without trouble, adjust themselves to it. But with wisdom and uprightness, with a guiding love of justice and humanity, with a renouncement of that mean and wicked prejudice against color which has so greatly possessed us, who can doubt but that all difficulties, with God's blessing, will be overcome? The question is often asked, "What shall be done with the freed blacks?" in a tone implying the belief that they must necessarily be a public burden and charge. As if their labor was not all needed; as if they who have taken care of their masters and themselves too, could not take care of themselves alone; as if they were not susceptible to the motives which sway human nature generally. There is another question, preceding this in importance, and which, rightly answered, and the answer put faithfully into act, would go far to lessen any difficulties connected with the former one,—the question, namely, "What shall be done *for* them?" or better, this, "In what *spirit* shall they be dealt with?" Welcomed with the respect which their nature claims, with the kindness and good-will which their former wrongs more abundantly entitle them to,—welcomed thus to the humanizing and elevating influences—social, intellectual, moral—which the age affords, who can doubt what response their lives would show?—that, approached and treated as men, they would show themselves such? that, educated for the duties and trusts of citizenship, they would be found equal to them? The moral obligation met, will enlighten for whatever practical demands their condition may present. The first duty done, God will show, as he always does, the next,—and lead and bless us in it. "Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre?" asked the women, mournfully; for

the stone was very great. But when they came to the sepulchre an angel had already descended and rolled it away. "So let us go with sweet spices, not to embalm a dead, but to anoint a risen Lord, in the person of these poor, despised ones; and never fear but that we shall not only find the stone rolled back, but shall stand face to face with an angel, of heavenly brightness, and what was a sepulchre of death shall be the temple of the Lord of life."

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